

Trinidad Romero

1835–1918

TERRITORIAL DELEGATE 1877–1879
REPUBLICAN FROM NEW MEXICO

Considered one of the “most widely known and influential politicians of New Mexico in the territorial days,” Trinidad Romero, a successful merchant and entrepreneur, served a single term as a Territorial Delegate to Congress. His short time in the House, like that of many other New Mexican Delegates of the era, marked but a brief moment in a long career in various territorial offices.¹

Trinidad Romero was born June 15, 1835, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Miguel Romero and Josefa Delgado. Miguel had extensive experience in the American occupation government. He was appointed *alcalde* (mayor) of Santa Fe by General Stephen Kearny during the military occupation period and was a founder of the Republican Party in New Mexico. The second of 10 children, Romero was educated by private tutors and also received some formal schooling.² He left Santa Fe at age 15 and moved 50 miles east to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where he “engaged extensively in sheep and cattle raising ... also in the general merchandising business, which through careful management, yielded him a large profit.”³ Romero assisted his father with freighting goods via ox teams between St. Louis, Missouri, and Las Vegas, New Mexico, in 1851. The business prospered since Las Vegas lay astride the Santa Fe Trail, which connected Santa Fe with Independence, Missouri. The family also took advantage of the burgeoning railroad industry to form a merchandise conglomerate. The senior Romero and three of his sons, including Trinidad, founded the Romero Mercantile Company in 1878, with Miguel serving as the company’s first president. Trinidad succeeded his father and later yielded the post to one of his brothers. The business prospered, enabling the family to build branch stores in other New Mexican towns. Romero married Valeria Lopez, the daughter of a Las Vegas, New Mexico,

sheriff. The couple had eight children: Serapio; Bernardo; Roman; Miguel; Epimenia; Trinidad, Jr.; Valeria; and Margarita. The family’s wealth was considerable; Romero was a prominent landowner in San Miguel County, and his holdings included a 3,000-acre ranch and the sprawling El Puertocito Grant, which he owned with his brother, Eugenio, a prominent politician.⁴

Romero became politically active in the 1860s as a result of his business activities. Elected to the territorial house of representatives in 1863, he served for one term.⁵ He also served as probate judge of San Miguel County in 1869 and 1870. During the 1860s, Romero emerged as one of the leaders of the Republican Party in San Miguel County, which encompassed his political base in Las Vegas, and which had experienced considerable growth. At the time, San Miguel County was in the north-central portion of the territory; later, portions of it were carved out to form Guadalupe County in the south. Canyons and highlands shaped the northwestern landscape of San Miguel, which stretched from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and was drained by the Pecos River. The 655,000-acre Pablo Montoya Grant yawned across the western part of the county, sustaining some of the largest cattle-ranching operations in the territory. By 1880 the Santa Fe Railroad had been built across the northwestern section of San Miguel.⁶

In 1876 Romero ran for the Delegate’s seat in the U.S. House for the 45th Congress (1877–1879) when Stephen B. Elkins, a powerful attorney and the incumbent Delegate, chose not to run for re-election.⁷ Elkins controlled New Mexico’s most potent political machine, the Santa Fe Ring, a network of business, legal, and political elites who dominated territorial affairs. Romero received not only Elkins’s endorsement, but also the unanimous nomination of the Republican territorial



convention.⁸ In a glowing editorial highlighting Romero's business acumen, a partisan supporter asked, "If you had to choose one of these candidates with whom to entrust your private business ... would you not rather trust the man who has guided his own business affairs with the most discretion[?] Every voter would do so in his own business; then why will you not act as wisely when you entrust a man with your public business[?]"⁹ Romero defeated Democrat Pedro Valdez, a two-term member of the territorial assembly (and former speaker) with 56 percent of the vote in a relatively clean election.¹⁰

When Romero claimed his seat in the U.S. House in October 1877 at the opening of the 45th Congress, he was given no committee assignments. (Territorial Delegates had only recently been granted the privilege of serving on standing committees, and no New Mexico Delegate would serve on a committee until 1880.) Nevertheless, Romero exercised his right to submit legislation, introducing eight bills that reflected his preoccupation with constituent services. The purposes of the bills ranged from seeking pension relief for individuals to confirming land claims in New Mexico. Romero also sought compensation for former Delegate Francisco Perea's battalion of militia that fought against the Confederate Army from November 1861 to January 1862.¹¹

Much of his legislative work was frustrated because his party did not control the House. Romero's rights and privileges were curtailed by House Rules that favored the Democratic majority, and his weakness was compounded by the fact that he was a freshman. Moreover, his legislative priorities ranked low because of his status as a nonvoting Delegate. Frustrated at his inability to obtain financial relief for farmers whose crops were damaged by a grasshopper infestation in Rio Arriba and Taos Counties, Romero apologized to a local judge in a public letter. "Thrice have I attempted by introducing a resolution for the purpose, but thrice my resolution has been defeated," he wrote. Since the House calendar, which prioritizes the legislation the chamber will debate and vote upon, was determined by the majority party, Romero's bills were listed

at the bottom of the agenda or ignored altogether.¹² "If the House would have acted on the private calendar at its due time, the bill ... would have passed a long time since," Romero explained. "But unfortunately it was not done, not on account of time, but on account of politics and demagogueism which predominate in the present Congress and seems to absorb the whole attention of its members." After promising to continue fighting for federal relief money, Romero closed his public letter by offering "one hundred head of sheep, as my private contribution for the relief of those that are in most need."¹³

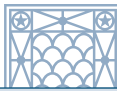
Like many of his contemporaries who served as Territorial Delegates—party placeholders who treated their positions as stepping stones to new political or business ventures in the territory—Romero declined to seek re-election in the 46th Congress (1879–1881). He returned to his business activities in the territory and remained active in local politics, serving as a U.S. Marshal from 1889 to 1893. Romero was one of only a handful of *nuevomexicanos* to hold this position in the 19th century. He also edited the *Campaign Bulletin*, a short-lived newspaper that covered aspiring New Mexican Republican politicians.¹⁴ By 1891, a historical survey of the territory noted that although Romero had "lost two fortunes ... through his indomitable will and ambitious and energetic spirit he ... is to-day reputed to be one of the [most] successful men of New Mexico."¹⁵ On August 28, 1918, Romero died in Las Vegas, New Mexico.¹⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Trinidad Romero" <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 "Trinidad Romero Dies at Las Vegas at Age of 83 Years," 29 August 1918, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 5. For a brief description of the evolution of congressional careers in the 19th century, see Linda L. Fowler, "Congressional Careers," in Donald C. Bacon, Roger H. Davidson, and Morton Keller, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the United States Congress*, vol. 3 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995): 1379–1383.



- 2 "Trinidad Romero," in Maurilio E. Vigil, *Los Patrones: Profiles of Hispanic Political Leaders in New Mexico History* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980): 63–69; Helen Haines, *History of New Mexico from the Spanish Conquest to the Present Time, 1530–1890* (New York: New Mexico Historical Publishing Co., 1890): 360–363. According to Vigil, Romero did not receive any formal schooling, but according to Haines, Romero "received the benefits of a common school education in Santa Fe." See also Carlos Brazil Ramirez, "The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico: A Study of Classical Colonialism," (Ph.D. diss., University of California–Santa Barbara, 1979): 297.
- 3 Haines, *History of New Mexico from the Spanish Conquest to the Present Time, 1530–1890*: 360.
- 4 Ibid., 363; Ramirez, "The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico": 297.
- 5 W. G. Ritch, *The Legislative Blue Book of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968; reprint of 1882 edition): 110.
- 6 For a description of San Miguel County, see Charles F. Coan, *A History of New Mexico*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1925): 545–548.
- 7 "The Republican Candidate," 15 September 1876, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 1.
- 8 "The Convention Thursday," 16 September 1876, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 1.
- 9 "For Delegate," 24 October 1876, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 3.
- 10 "Trinidad Romero," in Vigil, *Los Patrones: Profiles of Hispanic Political Leaders in New Mexico History*: 63–69; Ralph E. Twitchell, *Leading Facts of New Mexico History*, vol. 2 (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, 1912): 406–407; "The Official Vote of New Mexico," 12 December 1876, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 1. The final tally had Romero with 9,591 votes against Valdez's 7,418. These election results are confirmed in the *Congressional Directory*, 45th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878): 76. For biographical and career information about Valdez, see Ritch, *The Legislative Blue Book of New Mexico*, 106, 110; and Ramirez, "The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico": 296–297. Valdez served in the Eighth Legislative Assembly (1858–1859) and Fourteenth Legislative Assembly (1863–1865). According to Ramirez, Valdez submitted the 1859 slave code bill on behalf of Territorial Delegate Miguel Antonio Otero and territorial secretary Alexander Jackson.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, Index, 45th Cong., 2nd sess.: 479; *Congressional Record*, Index, 45th Cong., 3rd sess.: 269; *Congressional Record*, House, 45th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 April 1878): 2422.
- 12 Roger H. Davidson and Walter Oleszek, *Congress and Its Members*, 10th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008): 246.
- 13 "The Appropriation for the Taos Sufferers," 15 June 1878, (Santa Fe) *Weekly New Mexican*: 2.
- 14 Ramirez, "The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico": 297.
- 15 Haines, *History of New Mexico from the Spanish Conquest to the Present Time, 1530–1890*: 360.
- 16 "Trinidad Romero," in Vigil, *Los Patrones: Profiles of Hispanic Political Leaders in New Mexico History*: 67; "White House Callers," 8 November 1889, *Los Angeles Times*: 5; "Trinidad Romero Dies at Las Vegas at Age of 83 Years."